



Town of Groton, Connecticut

Meeting Minutes

Town Council Committee of the Whole

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Mayor Heather Bond Somers, Councilors Dean G. Antipas, Bruce S. Flax, Bill Johnson, Frank O'Beirne, Jr., Deborah L. Peruzzotti, Rita M. Schmidt, James L. Streeter, and Harry A. Watson

Tuesday, March 6, 2012

6:00 PM

Town Hall Annex - Community Room 1

SPECIAL MEETING

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Somers called the meeting to order at 6:07 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Members Present: Mayor Somers, Councilor Antipas, Councilor Flax, Councilor Johnson, Councilor O'Beirne, Jr., Councilor Peruzzotti, Councilor Schmidt, Councilor Streeter and Councilor Watson

Also present were Town Manager Mark Oefinger and Executive Assistant Nicki Bresnayan.

3. NEW BUSINESS

2012-0007

Meeting with State Legislators (2012 Standing Referral)

Discussed

State Representatives Ted Moukawsher and Elissa Wright were present to address the Town Council. Town Manager Oefinger noted that the Town's FYE 2013 Proposed Budget will be available by March 15th with a public hearing on March 29th. The Town is using the governor's biennial budget estimate, but would appreciate the legislators' insight into anticipated budget modifications or ways to obtain additional revenues. The revenue that that Town receives from the state as a percentage of total revenues has declined steadily over the years. Mr. Moukawsher noted that the state faced an historic deficit last year, but the Governor has been committed to maintaining municipal funding. At the end of the last session, there was a debate about the governor's authority to cut the budget and the authority to cut municipal aid was rescinded. Currently, the state is operating at a deficit. Numbers will not be available for municipalities until April. Mr. Moukawsher feels that, given the legislature's stance and the governor's previous position to maintain municipal aid, the outlook is good for municipalities. There has been no effort to rescind grants or other aid to municipalities. With respect to new revenue, the legislature has enacted some new revenue sharing that will help to address MM&E reimbursements. Discussion followed on Enterprise Zone funding.

Ms. Wright noted that state aid in general has increased slightly over a 10 year period. She stated it is not factual to say that state aid as declined and that is the reason for increased property taxes. Discussion followed on Education Cost Sharing (ECS). Ms. Wright stated that the Town cannot expect any large increases in municipal aid, but she too noted the municipal revenue sharing account as well as opportunities for regional, inter-district collaborations and incentive grants. She feels the state should review tax incentives for economic development to determine their effectiveness. Given the decline in revenues, Ms. Wright feels that the state holding the line for municipalities has been an accomplishment.

Councilor O'Beirne noted that when the rate of inflation is applied to state aid it shows that the local contribution is increasing. He asked if there is any impetus to have the state budget done earlier. Mr. Moukawsher noted they are two-year budgets, but yearly adjustments must be made. This year, the legislative session ends on May 6th.

Kirsten Hoyt, Chairman of the Board of Education, noted that previous ARRA funding supplanted

ECS funding. Ms. Wright stated that ECS funding will be returned to pre-ARRA levels. Mr. Hoyt explained that while Groton's enrollment figures have decreased, there are 1,000 transient students that do not have funding or support. Mr. Kadri explained that there are 5,000 students on the rolls, but over the course of the year, there are 5,600 to 6,000 unique students and there is an additional cost associated with those students in terms of supplies and staff time. He suggested that mobility should be a factor in ECS. Mr. Kadri stated he would calculate the costs for the legislators. The Town Manager stated that the latest federal impact aid figures are in the range of \$3.5 to \$3.75 million. The projection is for \$750,000 less in impact aid. Councilor O'Beirne noted that the ECS formula changes from time to time, but reimbursement is delayed up to two years. Mr. Kadri stated that impact aid has been underfunded in previous years and the funding is inconsistent so it is hard to estimate.

Councilor Flax asked how other municipalities have fared with ECS. Mr. Moukawsher explained that it is a complicated formula which makes it hard to compare with other towns, but there is no reason to believe that Groton is being shortchanged. Flax questioned if the political subdivisions are eligible for the regional grants and the legislators said they believe they are. The Town Manager reminded Councilors of the three projects that have been submitted by the SCCOG under the regional grant program.

Mayor Somers asked about proposed legislation dealing with adjusting the high tide line. Ms. Wright stated that the legislation has been advocated by land surveyors to verify DEEP's jurisdiction. Mr. Moukawsher feels that the legislation is designed to achieve unanimity and it will have only a slight effect. There is another bill, however, that is concerned with global warming that is more dramatic.

Mayor Somers state that she would like to see the legislature allow fiscally responsible towns like Groton to levy their own local taxes. Mr. Moukawsher expressed support for more municipal autonomy.

Mayor Somers stated that there should be no more unfunded mandates because they all create hardships for municipalities. Councilor Streeter cited the example of allowing voters to register on the last day before an election or the requirement that a telephone be available at each voting location for disabled voters. Watson cited the recent requirement that towns pay for police officer training, which Town Manager Oefinger noted will cost the Town \$10,000 to \$13,000 for initial training of a recruit and then a charge per course per officer for ongoing training. Town Manager Oefinger cited the requirement that the Town pay DMV to receive motor vehicle information. Individually, the value of these items may not be huge, but they add up over time. Ms. Hoyt noted that anti-bullying legislation requires that every school have a consultant. Mr. Moukawsher noted that municipal feedback is important for legislators realize the impact of these items.

Additional discussion took place on the high tide legislation. Ms. Wright expressed concern with DEEP jurisdiction versus the Army Corps and the divergence of definitions.

Mr. Moukawsher raised the issue of racial balance, improvements at West Side, and legislation that was passed last year that provides 85% reimbursement for certain towns including Groton. He feels that seeking a waiver is not the best option and noted that funding was targeted to address racial diversity.

Mayor Somers asked legislators to look at increasing the reimbursement rate for renovations so that schools do not have to be renovated to new which sometimes makes it cheaper to build new rather than renovate. Wes Greenleaf explained that only some renovations are eligible for reimbursement versus renovate to new where everything is eligible.

RTM Moderator Ambroise questioned the diversity mandate. Ms. Wright provided a history noting that the statute was enacted in 1969 and the Department of Education then promulgated regulations based on the legislation. Mr. Ambroise questioned the definition of 'diverse'. Ms. Hoyt noted that major redistricting will be required in order to balance the schools in Groton and there should be more creative options. Wright feels there are a variety of ways to address the issues internally but she did not have any suggestions. Mr. Kadri agreed that the way that Connecticut identifies an interracial couple is antiquated and should be redefined. He expressed support for taking advantage of the higher reimbursement rate. The only way for Groton to meet the racial diversity requirement is to transport students out of schools into others or to poach into a catchment area so that students from one area are going to different schools, thereby separating the community. Mr. Moukawsher stated that there are other forces at work at the federal level that may compel the Town's action and a longer conversation is necessary.

Mr. Ambroise suggested that redefining diversity is a good place to start. Ms. Wright stated that the definition of racial minorities is outlined in the statutes and perhaps that should be looked at. Mr. Moukawsher added that the magnet schools in Hartford are not working to address Sheff and O'Neill.

Councilor Schmidt asked if the revenues that could be raised in Groton would stay in Groton and Mr. Moukawsher stated no, which is a concern that has been expressed by other communities.

With respect to the Mystic Education Center property, the Town Manager asked that the state not break off any more of the property its reuse/disposition has been decided. The Town Manager has had discussions with an entity interested in the property that has asked for additional time to study the property to determine if the property is large enough for the desired use.

With respect to the Pfizer uncertainty, Town Manager Oefinger asked if there is anything the state can do to get a better handle on the situation and what if anything the Town can do.

Town Manager Oefinger responded to an earlier statement by Ms. Wright. He did not state that the Town is getting less money from the state, but that the dollars from the state are not staying current with other increases. Anything short of property tax reform in Connecticut is a band-aid. Over time, there is less and less of a correlation between property taxes and the services that residents are receiving. Mr. Moukawsher agreed that the best incentive for business would be a better overall tax structure, but the state would have to change how schools are funded.

Mayor Somers thanked the legislators for coming. Mr. Moukawsher relayed Senator Maynard's regrets for not attending.

2012-0066 Board of Education Supplemental Appropriation Request

Not Discussed

2011-0218 Fitch High School Baseball Field - Update

A motion was made by Councilor Flax, seconded by Councilor Johnson, to enter executive session at 7:35 p.m. to discuss 2012-0218 Fitch High School Baseball Field - Update and to invite Town Manager Mark Oefinger and Town Attorney Eric Callahan to attend.

The motion carried unanimously

Discussed

The executive session ended at 8:16 p.m.

2012-0048 Purchase of Spicer Properties, Thomas Road

Not Discussed

4. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 8:16 p.m.